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ABSTRACT

Charles Dickens was not only a master novelist but was also a master in the art of performance. His distinctive reading style was in marked contrast to the standard practices of mid-nineteenth century elocution, but his unique readings and performance philosophy closely resemble the text-centered approach of modern oral interpretation. Considered by many of his contemporaries to be the outstanding solo reader, Dickens aspired to be an actor, which enabled him to create the many memorable characters in his writing. When he read his works, it was his characterization that won the critics' acclaim. His physical gestures were accentuated by gaslight and an unobtrusive backdrop. He also employed vocal variations in pitch, regional dialects, and even the imitation of speech impediments to present his characters as faithfully as conceived in print. In Dickens's time, elocution, or the study of articulation, modulation, and inflection, was prescribed in instituted lessons and exercises. The omission of characterization in elocutionist texts makes Dickens a pioneer in the history of interpretation. His innovations are now common practice in the field of interpretation: the recent movement toward greater physicality makes interpretation actually closer to Dickens's style than was true earlier in this century. (HTH)

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19th CENTURY ROOTS OF MODERN INTERPRETATION THEORY: DICKENS AS A PLATFORM PERFORMER

". . . from these garish lights I vanish now forever more, with a heartfelt, grateful, respectful, and affectionate farewell."[1]

These words, spoken by Charles Dickens in London on the 15th of March 1870, closed his Farewell Readings and ended a much lauded performance career. For Dickens was not only a master in the literary art of the novelist but was also a master in the art of performance.

> Like all great masters in every art, Mr. Dickens shows his power in his simplicity. Of elocution; properly, or rather improperly speaking, there is no trace in their readings. He laughs the "Rules" to scorn. He is as guiltless of inflections as a Chinese noun. Sometimes every sentence, every clause in a long paragraph will turn up its toes, figuratively speaking, in a manner that would make Prof. Hows gasp with horror. Sometimes he is monotonous to that degree that every well regulated elocutional person must scorn him with inarticulate scorn. Sometimes he is quite indistinct in his utterance. He makes what gestures he has mind to. He even defies propriety time and again by making gestures with his legs. Viewed from the conventional standpoint, his reading is quite shocking. . . . What, we should like to know, are

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> books good for, and rules, and axioms, and "illustrative examples," if this gentleman is to throw them ruthlessly to the winds in his style?[2]

As this citation makes evident, when contrasted with the standard practices of mid-nineteenth century elocution, Dickens' distinctive style made his readings unique. However, what is most remarkable is that Dickens as a performer prefigured the modern interpreter. His performance philosophy shows a close resemblance to the text-centered approach of today and Dickens' performances, so revolutionary in his age, are actually indicative of interpreters' readings in our time.

His reading tours between the years 1858 to 1870 created a sensation. While it is undeniable that his pre-established popularity as an author was responsible for the original public interest in his performances, it should be understood that no literary reputation, however great, could have solely sustained a performance career and so excite audiences as Dickens had done without the accompaniment of an abundance of talent as a performer. Considered by many of his contemporaries to be the outstanding solo reader, it has been said of Charles Dickens that:

> he was able, alone, and unaided by scenery or other stage surroundings, to hold, spellbound, critical audiences, and at his will to call forth tears or laughter, Dickens proved that as an actor he was the possessor of absolute genius.[3]

A tradition of platform readings and institutionalized schools

of elocution flourished in Dickens' age. However, this is not the tradition from which Charles Dickens had emerged. Dickens, from his youth aspired to be an actor. He enjoyed the theatre immensely and admired Charles Mathews, a British actor, whose style young Dickens emulated. As Dickens would do later in the century,

> Mathews staged a remarkable one-man show, impersonating various characters, living and fictitious, often with little or no facial make-up. He seems to have had an inexhaustible repertoire of different voices and mannerisms, male and female, with perfect command of dialects, and this appealed to Dickens at the time, as the highest form of dramatic talent.[4]

When Dickens turned to writing, the actor within him was made manifest in his novels' many memorable characters. Indeed, even his method of composition reflected the actor's impulse. As remembered by his daughter, Dickens while working on a novel would suddenly jump up from his writing desk to perform pantomimes in front of a mirror. The purport of these curious exercises--which included vocalizations--was at first a cause for bewilderment for his daughter. Years later, however, she came to understand that "he had thrown himself completely into the character he was creating and . . . had actually become in action, as in imagination the character of his pen."[5] When Dickens read publically as a platform performer, it was his characterizations which won him the critics' special acclaim:

> his characters are real to him, and he makes them

> real to his readers; and therein consists the spell that he wields, no less as an actor than as a writer. . . . His reading last night, was full of excellence. As on the first occasion he perfectly personated Bob Cratchit, the Little Judge, Winkle, Weller, and Old Scrooge--in the latter case even to so slight a detail as the habit of putting the hand to the mouth when speaking--so, on the second occasion, he omitted no characteristic of the unctuous humor and stately bombast of the heroic Micawber, nor Mrs. Micawber's sweetly insinuating gabble, nor a particle of Mrs. Crupp's garrulity, nor the doleful drawl of "lorn" Mrs. Gummidge, nor the shrill, vixenish, spitefulness of Mrs. Raddle, nor the bland benevolence and child-like simplicity of Mr. Pickwick. Hard work wasevident at every point; but it was work that had been done, and that now told only in its perfect results.[6]

> Throughout the reading of this story ["Little Dombey" from Dombey and Son] Mr. Dickens displays his marvellous faculty for effacing himself in whatever character he is personating, whether it be the pompous Mr. Dombey . . . or any other creation with which he has peopled our memory.[7]

What emerges from the reviews is the method by which Dickens captured the personalities of his novels. Kate Field stated that "what Dickens does is frequently infinitely better than anything he

says, or the way he says it. . . . It is pantomime worthy of the finest actor."[8] The use of physicality made his performances visually spectacular and were an intrinsic part of his readings. The extent to which Dickens incorporated physical movement in contrast to many of his contemporaries is made evident:

> The gesticulation of Mr. Dickens is also surprisingly good, especially when we remember how averse Englishmen usually are to anything approximating the expansiveness of continental pantomime. We need only instance the jingling of the watch chain by Mr. Dombey, and the waving of Little Dombey's feeble hand in the air when bidding "goodby" to all who weep around his dying bed, to show how fitly Mr. Dickens "suits the action to the word."[9]

The stage on which Dickens performed reflected his interest in the theatricality of gestures. At the height of his performance career, the setting consisted of a large screen of maroon cloth and a reading table.[10] In front of this unobtrusive cloth backdrop, Dickens stood illuminated by gaslight. Both the dark screen and the gaslight served to distinguish the gestures of his body and his face which was noted as being "capable of wonderfully varied expression."[11] No drapery concealed the legs of the table, the significance of which was that no gesture would be hidden from the audience.[12] Therefore, Dickens' reading table is more akin to an interpreter's lectern than a speaker's stand.

Dickens' character creations were also dependent on his ability

to manipulate his voice. To present his characters as faithfully as conceived in print, Dickens employed vocal variations in pitch, regional dialects, and even the imitation of speech impediments.

> . . . laughing at Fanny's ridiculous lisp and her ridiculous eye; or rejoicing in John Browdie's rich, ripe, Yorkshire burr . . . we are sure nothing can be better than this . . . But if John Browdie's Yorkshire was great to hear, what shall be said of the delicious vernacular of Boots?[13]

Despite such praise, Dickens has been described as monotonous in narrative passages, lacking in articulation, limited in power, and unpleasantly husky at times.[14] Such criticism underlines Dickens' inclination towards acting rather than elocution, as does the statement that "Mr. Dickens succeeds in dialogue more than in recitation, which shows that he is a better actor than elocutionist in the highest sense of that term."[15] Yet, even the critics' negative remarks were often qualified:

> If he is somewhat less effective in outbursts of passionate emotion, it is from lack of strength of voice, and not lack of sympathy. Such bursts, howbeit, seldom occur in his readings--and for the rest, his interpretation of simple pathos is altogether perfect and admirable.[16]

Thus through the use of voice and gesture, Dickens brought his characters to life and all the mannerisms and quirks which gave the

Dickensian personalities their delightful individuality in print remained intact in performance.

To fully understand Dickens' position in the history of interpretation, his readings must be contrasted with the standard practices of recitation in the mid-nineteenth century. John Hambury Dwyer, a professor of elocution, defined the study as follows:

> Elocution, which is the power of fluent speech, the flow of language, of expression and diction, the art of speaking with accuracy, elegance and perspicuity . . . [17]

This definition punctuates the concerns of the schools of elocution of the middle 1800s. The study of articulation, modulation, and inflection was prescribed in instituted lessons and exercises. According to C. P. Bronson's Manual of Elocution, a student would be taught to breath, laugh, sigh, aspirate, accent, articulate, modulate, and gesture through the study of concise rules. These methods, while considered pedantic by our present teachings, are indicative of the field of 19th century elocution.

While quite consistent in their views on good speech, the elocutionists' opinions on physical movement were less uniform. Many elocutionary manuals totally excluded any mention on gesture while others suggested the reader should heed restraint.[18] For those who did advocate the use of gesture, the correct manner of movement was as highly prescribed as were the vocal techniques. Lessons were organized by which students may assume graceful gesturing poses. The inspiration for these formal studies of movement was primarily Gilbert

Austin's Chironomia, to which R. Claggett alluded in his preface of Elocution Made Easy: "Obligations are cheerfully acknowledged to several foreign works, for some of the ideas incorporated in the work, and most of the figures illustrative of gesture."[19] Claggett's chapter on gesture opened with this statement:

> A graceful and impressive action is one of the highest accomplishments of the orator. So it was deemed by the celebrated orators of Athens and Rome. Its importance gives it a just claim to the special attention of the teachers of Elocution.[20]

The chapter continued with exercises in movement and illustrations similar to those of Austin, which we would now term as stylized, stereotypical gestures portraying broad emotions. Another illustrated manual on gesture was Jonathan Barber's Practice Treatise of Gesture, which was also inspired by Austin's work. In short, the prevailing attitude was that gesture, if it were to be used by a reader at all, should reflect the qualities of good speech: decorum, grace, and elegance.

Dickens' style of reading markedly contrasted to these elocutionary principles. The critics' detection of monotone, indistinct utterance, huskiness, and lack of vocal power permits the conjecture that Dickens did not adhere to the prescribed vocal techniques. The emphasis Dickens placed on characterization caused him to assume the vocal and physical peculiarities of the subjects he portrayed. Such characterization, in turn, negated the traditional emphasis on graceful gestures. While

Dickens' concern was in the faithful portrayal of the characters in his texts, the elocutionist's concern was in the manufacture of an elegant orator. For Dickens to delete the mannerisms of his characters--to speak with proper elocutional English or move with graceful deportment--would have been an act of expurgation.

It should be noted that none of the elocutionary texts of the period make mention of the art of characterization. This omission is highly significant in understanding Dickens' position as a pioneer in the history of interpretation. If a nineteenth century elocutionist were approached on the subject of characterization, he would have probably defended his position by stating that character delineation was not the concern of an elocutionist but that of an actor. This argument was, in fact, voiced by Merritt Caldwell in his Practical Manual of Elocution:

> It would not perhaps be entirely easy to point out the precise difference between the action suited to oratory, and that of the stage. The principle, however, on which this difference depends had been before hinted at: the actor appears in an assumed character, while the orator appears in his own. It is the part of the actor, then, to represent and sustain the character which he has assumed; and this may be entirely at variance with the dignity of oratory. The actor personates every passion and feeling which makes up the human character. . . . He may imitate nature; while imitative action is denied to the orator.[21]

Caldwell's discussion has a modern counterpart even today, as scholars and students still broach the subject of where interpretation ends and acting begins. What has changed, of course, since the 1800s, is that the emphasis in interpretation has shifted away from the production of a graceful orator to the study of the text performance. By centering its concern on the text, interpretation consequently involves itself intimately with characterization.

This harkens back to Dickens' interest in the art of characterization and his own emphasis on the text in performance, which divided him from not only the traditional elocutionists but even from the less conventional professional readers of his time. This is made evident in the following enthusiastic citation:

> Hear Dickens, and die; you will never live to hear anything of its kind so good. There has been nothing so perfect, in their way, as those readings ever offered to an English audience. Great actors and actresses--Mrs. Siddons herself among them--have read Shakespeare to us; smaller actors, like the Mathews, the elder and the younger, John Parry, and others, have given "entertainments" of a half-literary, half-histrionic order; eminent authors, like Coleridge and Sydney Smith, and Thackeray, have read lectures--and many living authors still lecture--but all those appearances, of performances, or whatever else they may be called, are very different from Mr. Dickens' appearances and performances as a reader.

> He is a story-teller; a prose improvisatore; he recites rather than reads; acts rather than lectures.[22]

Dickens revolutionized platform readings and "invented a new medium for amusing an English audience, and merits the gratitude of an intelligent public."[23] At the close of his career, after his farewell readings, one London critic wrote: "In taking leave then of Mr. Dickens as a public reader or reciter, we need only reiterate the universally expressed opinion that in their kind these entertainments have been unique."[24]

Charles Dickens' style of platform recitation can be viewed as a sign-post pointing in the direction that elocution would ultimately follow. Dickens, by venturing to be faithful to the text, was actually a pioneer in the formation of what is now interpretation. His innovations, extraordinary in his time, are now common practice in the field of interpretation. Although his readings may be judged as somewhat flamboyant, evidence of Dickens' position in the history of interpretation is the presence of studies and discussions of characterization in interpretation classrooms and textbooks.[25] And by the recent movement towards greater physicality, interpretation is now actually closer to Dickens' style of performance than was true earlier in our own century.[26]

Looking back, the contribution of Charles Dickens in the history of interpretation becomes apparent, but one insightful reviewer was able to predict this even in Dickens' lifetime:

> That Dickens is one of the best of actors, and, as an interpreter of himself, stands unrivalled. . . . he has demonstrated by personal illustration the meaning of the long neglected art of reading.

He has shown us that it means a perfectly easy, unaffected manner, a thoroughly colloquial tone, and entire absence of the stilted elocution that has heretofore passed current for good reading, the virus of which has well-nigh ruined our school of public speaking. Dickens has done more: he has proven that the very best reading is such as approaches the very best acting, and in adopting the actor's profession he has paid the highest tribute to a noble art.[27]

Notes

[1]Hutton, Lawrence, ed. The Works of Charles Dickens: Letters and Speeches. Vol. 2. New York: Hearst's International Library Co., n. d., p. 582.

[2]"Mr. Dickens's Third Reading," New York Tribune, XXVII, No. 8324, 13 Dec. 1867, p. 4.

[3]T. Edgar Pemberton, Charles Dickens and the Stage (London: Kelly and Co., 1888), p. 1.

[4]F. Dubrez Fawcett, Dickens the Dramatist (London: Camelot Press Ltd., 1952), p. 7.

[5]Mamie Dickens, My Father As I Recall Him (Westminster: Roxburghe Press, n. d.), p. 48.

[6]"Charles Dickens: His Second Reading," New York Tribune, XXVII, No. 8322, 11 Dec. 1867, p. 4.

[7]"Charles Dickens: The Story of Little Dombey and the Trial from Pickwick," New York Herald, No. 11428, 14 Dec. 1867, p. 4.

[8]Kate Field, Pen Photographs of Charles Dickens's Readings (Boston: J. R. Osgood and Co., 1871), p. 33.

[9]"Charles Dickens: The Story of Little Dombey and the Trial from Pickwick," New York Herald.

[10]For discussion of the history of Dickens' reading table see Philip Collins' "Dickens's Public Reading: The Kit and the Team," Dickensian, 74 (January 1978), 8-16.

[11]Field, p. 21.

[12]Field, p. 19.

[13]"Mr. Dickens's Third Reading," New York Herald.

[14]Field, p. 28.

[15]"Dickens' Readings--Fifth Night," New York Herald, No. 11430, 16 Dec. 1867, p. 4.

[16]"Charles Dickens: His Second Reading," New York Tribune.

[17]John Hambury Dwyer, An Essay on Elocution(Albany: C. Van Benthuysen and Co., 1843), p. 7.

[18]Dwyer, p. v.

[19]R. Claggett, Elocution Made Easy(New York: Paine & Burgess, 1845), p. iv.

[20]Claggett, p. 32.

[21]Merritt Caldwell, A Practical Manual of Elocution(Philadelphia: Sorin & Ball, 1845), pp. 292-3.

[22]Scotsman, 8 Dec. 1868, as quoted in Philip Collins, Charles Dickens: The Public Readings(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. xlvii.

[23]Illustrated London News, 31 July 1858, p. 100, as quoted in Collins, p. xlvi.

[24]Clifton Chronicle, 27 Jan. 1869, as quoted in Collins, p. xlvi.

[25]For example see Wallace A. Bacon, The Art of Interpretation, 3rd ed.(1966; rpt. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), pp. 110-155.

[26]For example see Leslie Irene Coger and Sharron Henry Pelham, "Kinesics Applied to Interpreters Theatre," The Speech Teacher, No. 2 (Mar. 1975), pp. 91-99.

[27]Field, p. 143.